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THE CONVERSION OF ADIABENE TO JUDAISM

A NEW PERSPECTIVE

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JOSEPHUS' account of the conversion of Adiabene's ruling family to Judaism (*Antt.* 20, 2, 1–4, 3) cannot reasonably be rejected. He was a contemporary of Izates, Helene, and Monobazus II. His sources of information were excellent, for Adiabeniens were present in Jerusalem during his years there, and since they took a leading rôle in the war against Rome (66–73), he must certainly have known members of the royal family itself. Furthermore, his information on Parthia was generally sound; R. H. McDowell found, in his *Coins of Seleucia*, that points of disagreement between the Parthian narratives of Tacitus and Josephus are normally resolved by numismatic evidence in favor of Josephus.¹ The conversion is discussed in a definitive study by N. Brüll.² Here I shall propose a new interpretation.

I. *Background*

Adiabene occupied part of the territories of ancient Assyria. One of the chief cities of the region, Nisibis,³ contained a Jewish population, probably quite a large one, dating back to the exile of northern Israel in 722 B.C. Nisibis, which was on the Mygdonius River, an affluent of the Khabur, lay at the center of the localities mentioned in II Kings 17 6 and 18 11, where the northern tribes were deported. It was a center for the collection of temple offerings contributed in the upper Mesopotamian valley, like Nehardea in Babylonia to the south. A temple official, Judah

¹ Compare Eugen Täubler, *Die Parthernachrichten bei Josephus*, Berlin, 1904.

² N. Brüll, "Adiabene," in *Jahrbücher für Jüdische Geschichte und Literatur*, Frankfurt, 1874, I, pp. 58–86. See also H. Grätz, "Zur Anwesenheit der Adiabenenischen Königin in Jerusalem und des Apostel Paulus," *Monatschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums*, 26 (1877), pp. 241–55, 289–306.

³ Nisibis was not part of Adiabene before 36, when Artabanus presented the city to Izates as a reward for his loyalty. Strabo (*Geogr.* xvi, 1, 1) implies that Nisibis was not part of Adiabene, while Pliny (*Hist. Nat.* vi, 16, 42) reports that Nisibis and Alexandria were chief cities of Adiabene. On the remnants of the ten tribes in the Khabur area, see Emil Schürer, *The Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, II, ii, pp. 223–25; Avraham Ben-Yaakov, *Jewish Communities of Kurdistan*, [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1961), pp. 9–11.

ben Bathyra, lived there before 70, and was probably responsible for the transfer of funds. Contemporaries, moreover, identified the region with the ancient northern Mesopotamian settlements mentioned by Ezekiel, as evidenced by the targum on Jer 51 27, Ezek 27 23, and Gen 10 11, and Babylonian talmudic sayings.⁴

Additional Jewish populations lived in neighboring territories. Under Tigranes the Great, large numbers of Jews were deported to Armenia and resettled around Tigranocerta, along with other populations, to develop the economy of the area. During part of the first century A.D., moreover, Armenia was ruled by a Jewish dynasty, descended from Herod, as were Chalcis, Cappadocia, Iturea, Abilene, and Palestine. Further to the south, in Babylonia, large numbers of Jews were settled, and for a period of fifteen years (20–35) maintained an autonomous state under the brothers Anileus and Asineus.⁵

We know very little about Adiabene before the first century A.D. The country was taken from Parthian suzerainty by Tigranes, but Phraates regained it in 64 B.C. Like the rest of Parthia's empire, Adiabene was ruled by local officials, who maintained a feudal relationship with the central government, but were relatively free to conduct day-to-day affairs as they saw fit. We do not know what, if any, taxes were paid by the territory to the central government, but they could not have been oppressive.⁶

Josephus reported that the queen of Adiabene, Helene, and her son Izates embraced Judaism. Helene, who was married to her brother Monobazus, king of Adiabene, was converted by a Jewish merchant, Hananiah. Her son, the heir-apparent, Izates, then living in Charax Spasinu, on the Persian gulf, for safety from the jealousy of his half brothers, was likewise converted by another merchant. After the respec-

⁴ On Nisibis and Nehardea as centers for the storage of temple funds, see Josephus, *Antt.* 18, 9, 1 and 9. Brüll cites talmudic sayings, pp. 58–60. Judah ben Bathyra lived in Nisibis, and was reported to have frequented the tables of money changers there (Jer. Yebamot 12.1). He was in communication with temple authorities (Bab. Pesahim 3b). The patronymic "ben Bathyra" has been variously interpreted, but quite obviously was borne by a family of consequence in Jerusalem. On this basis, I infer that Judah b. Bathyra was a temple representative, who lived in Nisibis in order to supervise temple accounts there.

⁵ On the deportations of Tigranes, see Moses Xorenazi, *History*, II, ch. 14, and H. Rosenthal, "Armenia", *Jewish Encyclopedia*, II, s. v. On Herodian dynasts in the Near and Middle Eastern states, see Schürer, *op. cit.*, I, i, pp. 456 f.; I, ii, pp. 10–42, pp. 325–44. On the Jewish state in Babylonia, see Josephus, *Antt.* 18, 9, 1–9; and A. von Gutschmid, *Kleine Schriften* (Leipzig, 1879), III, pp. 53–55; N. C. Debevoise, *Political History of Parthia*, p. 155; and George Rawlinson, *Sixth Great Oriental Monarchy*, pp. 239–45.

⁶ See Fraenkel, "Adiabene", in Pauly-Wissowa s. v., and compare Pliny, *Hist. Nat.* v, 13, 66; Strabo, *Geogr.* xi, 4, 8; 14, 12; xvi, 1, 1; 1, 18 f., for classical references; see also Debevoise, *op. cit.*, pp. 51, 71, 75, and Rawlinson, pp. 85, 140–45.

tive conversions, the royal family maintained very close ties with Jerusalem. They made great efforts to impress the Palestinian Jews with their loyalty to Judaism, their benevolence, and generosity, making lavish donations to the temple and to the people in time of famine. They likewise impressed the Pharisaic party with their loyalty to its interpretation of Judaism. That these efforts were an unqualified success is indicated by numerous talmudic stories about both converts, as well as Monobazus II, Izates' heir.⁷

After his conversion, Izates succeeded to the throne. He became involved in the turbulent politics of Parthian succession. In A.D. 36, the Shah-an-shah Artabanus III was deposed by the nobility. Izates supported Artabanus, and when the latter returned to power, he rewarded Izates by ceding to Adiabene Nisibis and its surrounding territories, which had been held for a time by Armenia. During the complicated dynastic struggles of the next few years, through the accession of Vologases I in 51, Adiabene was repeatedly threatened by invasion on the part of one or another contender, without significant result. Vologases himself invaded Armenia, and at the same time threatened Izates, but the Roman invasion of 57–8 under Corbulo necessitated joint action against the western peril. Corbulo took Armenia by 60, and the Roman appointee, Tigranes V, ravaged Adiabene. Vologases hastened to Adiabene to support the threatened satrap. After an indecisive campaign, Corbulo accepted a peace agreement with the Parthians and their Adiabenean allies at Rhandaia, in A.D. 63, agreeing to withdraw from Armenia, and to negotiate the entire Armenian question at Rome. The resulting agreement, signed in A.D. 66, produced a Parthian-Roman condominium in Armenia.⁸

There is considerable reason, according to A. Schalit, to believe that the Romans planned a new invasion of Armenia and Parthia in 66, for a new legion was created for this purpose, and another was shifted eastward.⁹ But the Jewish war in Palestine prevented it, and the invasion

⁷ Josephus, *Antt.* 20, 2, 1–4, 3. A good summary of the talmudic legends is to be found in J. Hamburger, *Realencyclopaedie für Bibel und Talmud* II, s. v. Helene, pp. 373–74, Izates, pp. 556–57, and Monobaz, p. 802. Examination of these stories is not relevant here. What is relevant is that people believed them, which proves that the Adiabeneans succeeded in impressing Palestinian Jews, particularly Pharisees, by their piety and benevolence, as had their contemporary, Agrippa I.

⁸ For the Parthian background, see Debevoise, *op. cit.*, pp. 165–75, 196–97.

⁹ See A. Schalit, "Roman Policy in the Orient from Nero to Trajan" [in Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 7, 2 (1936), pp. 159–80. See Josephus, *B. J.* Pref. 2 (§6); 2, 16, 4 (§388); 2, 19, 2; 4, 9, 11; 5, 4, 2; 5, 6, 1; 5, 9, 5. Two of the members of the royal family, Monobazus (but presumably not the reigning king of that name) and Cenedaeus participated in the ambush of Cestius, which marked the outbreak of war. It was clear that the Jerusalem rebels hoped for support from the diaspora (*B. J.* 2, 16, 4) but did not receive it. A third Adiabenean fought, Nabataeus of Adiabene (*B. J.* 5, 11, 5).

was abandoned. The Adiabeniens took a very active part in the Jewish war against Rome. Parthia herself did not intervene, nor did Babylonian Jews volunteer support for the Palestinians. On the other hand, the Adiabeniens royalty was well represented in the opening campaign, and remained loyal to the zealot cause until the end. The Parthians could have objected to Adiabeniens intervention in Palestine, but did not. Having an excellent intelligence service, they doubtless knew of Roman plans to move against the east. Under their treaty obligations, they could hardly support the revolutionaries, but it was quite expedient to permit the Adiabeniens to do what the central government could not. The result was important help for the Palestinians, the only substantial support they received from the diaspora.⁹ After the war, moreover, Josephus specifically addressed himself to Adiabene, to see that the Roman view of war guilt was known among the Jews there.

In the subsequent Roman invasions of Parthia, in 114–117, 161–165, and 193–199, Adiabene was always a center of fighting, and always supported the Parthian cause. F. M. Heichelheim has conjectured, moreover, that the Adiabeniens actually organized the massive Jewish rebellions of 115–117 in Egypt, Cyrenaica, Cyprus, and elsewhere, in order to save Parthia from Roman domination, but there is not a shred of evidence on the basis of which such a conjecture may be evaluated.¹⁰

II. *Interpretation*

As a general rule, the conversion of a ruling dynasty ought to be regarded, like that of Constantine, as having political as well as religious motivation. That the conversion of Adiabene's royal family had negative political consequences is manifest in Josephus' account, for he makes it clear that the royal family feared the nobility's disapproval of their conversion and circumcision. Some of the nobility supported Izates' enemies. One may well wonder, therefore, what political advantage could have accrued to the house of Monobazus by the conversion of the dynasty to Judaism.

We may, first of all, reconsider the position of the Jews in the Near and Middle East. From the perspective of Adiabene, they were a numerous and politically important group. Southward they had established a powerful Jewish barony at the heart of the Parthian empire, alongside the free city of Seleucia on the Tigris. Artabanus III was forced to negotiate with, and eventually to recognize, the Jewish state of Anileus and Asineus. Furthermore, in nearby Armenia, as well as in other areas, Jewish dynasts held power, if briefly. The Jewish population in Adiabene itself could not have been insubstantial. On the contrary, the

¹⁰ F. M. Heichelheim, in *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 32, pp. 106–07.

fact that apart from Nehardea, Nisibis was the only other trans-Euphrates center for temple collections suggests that the Jews in the Khabur area were as important as those in Babylonia, and we know that the latter were quite numerous. The Mesopotamian Jews included, also, international merchants; for example, the conversion of the monarchy was effected in widely separated places by Jewish merchants, as was that of Edessa in the next century. Palestinian Jewry was a powerful and militarily significant group. It was by no means out of the question for Palestine to regain its independence of Rome, perhaps in concert with the petty kings of the Roman orient. Rome certainly feared an alliance of the dynasts, as its severe reaction to Agrippa I's assembly of neighboring rulers in Tiberias suggests.

Further, we have noted that like Agrippa, the Adiabeniens went to great lengths to win over the Jews of Palestine. Like him, they tried specifically to cultivate Pharisaic support, and their success is attested in Pharisaic literature. Like Herod, they tried to impress the Jerusalemites with their strength, wealth, and magnanimity, adorning the temple and city with rich buildings.¹¹ Finally, the Adiabeniens not only encouraged the revolution of 66, but led the opening action against Cestius, which precipitated the complete break between Rome and Judea.

In order to understand these facts, we refer to the unachieved dream of Herod,¹² who, a half-century earlier, had made great efforts to ingratiate himself with the diaspora Jewries and the hellenistic city-states throughout the Near East. He was loyal to Rome. But he tried to win friends in other Roman dependencies, as well as among Babylonian Jewry.¹³ From his viewpoint, this was a wise policy. Rome was a new power in the Near East. Before her coming, politics had been unstable for more than a century and a half; in 40–37 B.C., Rome was driven out suddenly by the Parthians, with disastrous consequences for Herod himself. Herod could not depend wholly on the support of a power embroiled in civil war at home. Therefore, while completely loyal to Rome, he made preparations for the eventuality of Roman disappearance from Near Eastern politics by laying the groundwork for his own empire, which would be based upon support from Hellenists and Jews throughout the area.

¹¹ Josephus, *B. J.* 5, 4, 2; 6, 6, 4; 4, 9, 11. The royal family gave the city rich buildings, including a palace (*B. J.* 5, 6, 1), enormous tombs (*Antt.* 20, 4, 3; *B. J.* 5, 2, 2; 5, 3, 3; 5, 4, 7), and, like Paul and Barnabas, Helene brought famine relief to Jerusalem (*Antt.* 20, 2, 5).

¹² This was first stated by Albert Réville, "Les Hérodes et le rêve Hérodien," *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* (1894), pp. 45–47. See also A. Schalit, *Herod the King* [in Hebrew], Jerusalem, 1960, *passim*.

¹³ Note, for instance, his appointment of a Babylonian Jew as his first high priest, certainly a compliment to a community that considered its lineage purer than that of Palestine.

We may likewise interpret the ambitions of the Adiabenean royal family. From the perspective of their palace at Arbela the Adiabeneans, no less than the Armenians or Parthians, might hope to assume the hegemony of the Near East by means of judicious alliances. Strategically located on the frontiers of Parthia to the south and east, and Armenia to the north, east, and west, Adiabene was a key to the Mesopotamian valley. At the time of the conversion of the dynasty, moreover, the valley was in a state of unrest. Parthia was weakened by dynastic struggle, and no solidly established government existed throughout the area south of Armenia, outside of the local governments established by Jews and Greeks in Babylonia, and the frontier states and local satrapies. Looking westward, the Adiabeneans could hardly fail to discern signs of rebellion against Rome. She herself might form the capstone of an international Jewish alliance, based on Palestine to the west and Babylonia to the southeast. To secure such an alliance, the royal family had to win the support of these two great Jewish populations, on the one hand, and of potentially useful local Jewish subjects on the other. At this time, it was not uncommon for Near Eastern royalty to use religious rites for political purposes. The Arsacids tried to retain the loyalty of their Iranian subjects by laying great emphasis on the Iranian, and not hellenistic, ties of the royal household, even though in fact the Arsacids had a two-century-old tradition of participation in hellenistic culture. Thus they began to put Pahlavi on their coins, allegedly oversaw a new edition of the Avesta (at least according to Pahlavi traditions), and advanced, as earlier (but for a different reason), a claim of Achaemenid origin of their dynasty.¹⁴ One should not, therefore, be surprised to find that the Adiabenean royal household cultivated the religion of a powerful minority in the Mesopotamian valley, whose adherents governed important near-by states. It was, one should add, a not-at-all preposterous aspiration. In periods of political instability small states continually have risen, briefly, to international importance; one thinks immediately of the brief but spectacular hegemony of Odenathus and Zenobia of Palmyra in the middle of the third century A.D., and of Armenia in the first half of the first century B.C., both kingdoms not much larger than Adiabene.

Furthermore, from the viewpoint of Monobazus II, participation in the Palestinian war of 66 must have appeared a promising enterprise. Obviously, Adiabene stood to profit, like Armenia and Parthia, from Roman involvement in a Palestinian rebellion. For purely strategic reasons, therefore, it was to Adiabenean advantage to foment rebellion

¹⁴ On emphasis on Achaemenid origins, see my "Parthian Political Ideology," *Iranica Antiqua*, 3, 1 (1964). On the favor shown to Zoroastrianism by first-century Arsacids, and the editing of the Avesta, see J. Duchesne-Guillemin, *La Religion de l'Iran Ancien*, pp. 224–27, and R. G. Zaehner, *Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism*, pp. 175–77.

in Palestine, perhaps, as we have noted, with the tacit approval of Ctesiphon. But a secondary political motive is not irrelevant. If the Jews had won the war against Rome, who might expect to inherit the Jewish throne? It was not likely that Agrippa II could return to the throne, for he and his family were discredited by their association with Rome and opposition to the war. Some Jews probably expected that the Messiah would rule Judea, but this could not seriously have effected the calculations of the Adiabeniens. Indeed, from their viewpoint, they might reasonably hope to come to power. They were, after all, a ruling family; their conversion could not matter to the Palestinian Jews any more than Agrippa I's irregular lineage had prevented him from winning popular support. Their active support of the war, their earlier benefactions to the city and people in time of famine, their royal status, and the support they could muster from across the Euphrates, would have made them the leading, if not the only, candidates for the throne of Jerusalem.

This is not, of course, to suggest that the conversion of Helene and Izates was only an act of political significance. It is, however, relevant to an understanding of the political consequences of their religious action to take note of the promising situation which they confronted as a result of being converted to Judaism.



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SHORTER NOTE

THE CONVERSION OF ADIABENE TO CHRISTIANITY

By the time of Trajan's invasion of Adiabene in 115 or 116¹⁾, the satrapy had been ruled by a Jewish dynasty for more than seventy-five years.²⁾ According to the Chronicle of Arbela³⁾ Christianity firmly rooted itself in Adiabene in Trajan's time. This tradition has been rejected by several historians, most notably F. C. Burkitt⁴⁾. Here I shall reconsider it.⁵⁾

I

THE ARBELA TRADITION

The Chronicle of Arbela, which was written in the 6th century by Mešihazekha, tells us that Pekidha was the first bishop of Adiabene, and Šamson the second, the latter serving for seven years after the siege of Trajan.⁶ The source for these statements, Abel the Teacher, provided additional data of Parthian times (p. 11). Since Samson was martyred by Xosroes in 123, the Chronicle assumes that Christianity reached the satrapy about 100 A.D., according to Sachau (p. 13), who considers the tradition sound. He points out that Abel had access to the archives of the Arbela diocese. The following two centuries (123-316 A.D.) saw the following bishops in Arbela:

1) For a discussion of the difficult problems of chronology and strategy, see F. A. Lepper, *Trajan's Parthian War*, Oxford, 1948. Lepper questions whether Trajan even meant to make a province of Assyria out of Adiabene (p. 152), following V. Chapot and E. Albertini. Compare David Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor*, (Princeton 1950) p. 608, 672-3, 686, 1554.

2) See my "Conversion of Adiabene to Judaism", *JBL* LXXXIII, 1, 1964, p. 60-66. The king in Trajan's time was apparently called Mebarsapes according to Dio 68.22.2.Justi (*Iranisches Namenbuch*, repr. Hildesheim 1963, p. 202) knows of no other examples of the name.

3) Ed. Eduard Sachau, *Die Chronik von Arbela* (Berlin, 1915), (in the *Sitzungsber. d. Preus. Akad. d. Wiss., phil.-hist. Kl.*).

4) F. C. Burkitt, "Syriac-Speaking Christianity", in *Cambridge Ancient History*, XII, pp. 493-6.

5) Further discussion of Adiabene in the Parthian period will be found in N. Pigulevskaja, *Les Villes de l'État Iranien aux Époques Parthe et Sassanide* (Paris and The Hague, 1963), pp. 52-78, 113-115, 121, 173, 238, 243, and Louis Dillemann, *Haute Mésopotamie Orientale et Pays Adjacents, Contribution à la Géographie Historique de la Région du Ve S. Avant l'Ère Chrétienne au VIe S. de Cette Ère* (Paris, 1962), pp. 112, 273-286; on the Jews there p. 99, etc.

6) All page references to the Arbela Chronicle follow Sachau.

Isaac . . .	13 years	ʿEbedhmešīḥa . . .	35 years
Abraham . . .	15 years	Ḥairan . . .	33 years
Noah . . .	16 years	Šahlupha . . .	15 years
Vakanz . . .	4 years	Ahadhabhuhi . . .	18 years
Abel . . .	—	Šeriʿa . . .	— years

As for the missing forty-four years, Sachau divides those years between the two the length of whose episcopates is not definitely known. Sachau concludes: “dass das Christentum jenseits des Tigris viel älter ist, als man bisher wissen konnte und vermutete, und dass seine ersten Anfänge ungefähr bis zu dem Jahre 100 n. Chr. hinaufreichen.”

According to Abel the Teacher, Pekidha, the first bishop of Adiabene, had met the apostle Addai in person (p. 42). He was the son of a poor man, who was in the service of a Magus. But Pekidha was greatly impressed by a miracle of healing which Addai performed, and accepted his gospel, after several years of study returning to his native city to teach the new faith. After his death, six years passed before the bishop of Bet-Zabhdai, Mazra, came to Arbela with a caravan of merchants. He found the small Christian community and ordained Samson, the servant of Pekidha. Samson made numerous converts among Mazdeans, and was, as a result, martyred. His successor, Isaac, served a numerous community of Christians.

II

AN ARMENIAN TRADITION ON ADIABENE

Moses Xorenazi provides (II, 57) an interesting tradition about events in the time of Trajan's invasion.⁷) He reports that the Amaduni, a family of Jewish origin, came to Armenia during the reign of Ardašes, at the time of Trajan's invasion, from the eastern part of the country of the Arik. The family was descended from 'a certain Manue.' The name of Samson was carried by his son, as it was 'a Jewish custom to give the name of their ancestors to their descendants, in the hope that these names would be suitably applied.' The Amaduni had achieved honor in the 'country of Arak,' near Ahmadan (Hamadan). Xorenazi does not know why they came to Armenia, but they were well received and became important noble family. 'The Persians still call them Manuyans, in the name of their ancestor.'

I cannot explain the name Amaduni. Manue, however, is an Armenian form of the well-known name Monobazes, which exists also in Parthian. The Parthian form is M^aN^aW^aZ, and the Armenian was therefore a representation of the consonantal form.⁸) If so one must recall that

7. See my "Jews in Pagan Armenia", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* LXXXIV, 3, 1964, 230-240, esp. 239-40.

8) See Heinrich Hübschmann, *Armenische Grammatik*, I, *Armenische Etymologie* (Repr. Hildesheim, 1962), p. 50 s.v. (Manavaz) = Gr. Μονόβαζος

“the house of Monobazes” was, in fact, the ruling dynasty of Adiabene. We have no information about the house of Monobazes after the Jewish War against Rome (66-73).⁹⁾ If, however, Xorenazi’s Amaduni were actually identical with the ruling house of Adiabene of former days, then one may conjecture that the house of Monobazes fled eastward in the face of Trajan’s invasion of the country. We know that Mebarsapes, king of Adiabene, had imprisoned Trajan’s emissary, Sentius, and had, in consequence, been deposed. Having to flee, the royal house could not have turned west or northward, since Armenia was already in Roman hands, and for the same reason could not flee to the south. The nearest unoccupied territory was eastward, at Hama-dan. After Trajan’s retreat, the royal house did not return to Adiabene. The reason may have had to do with the continuing resentment of part of the nobility against the conversion of the monarchy to Judaism. We know that such had been the case in the time of Vologases’ invasion of the satrapy, ca. 50 A.D.

At that time, the nobility expressed keen resentment against the conversion of the ruling house to Judaism. One may suggest that the Monobazes was replaced by a Mazdean monarch, and therefore was unable to return. The Arbela Chronicle supports such a conjecture.

What is especially interesting is the fact that the name of Samson was, according to Xorenazi, particularly prized by this Jewish family. This same name was, as we have seen, associated with the Christian community of Arbela. On such a flimsy basis, one may only conclude that the ancient biblical hero held an important place in the imagination of Adiabenean Judaism and Christianity, for so the Arbela Chronicle explicitly states (p. 44, trans. Sachau):

Der Simson des Alten Testamentes hat durch seine Kraft die Philister in die Flucht geschlagen und unterjocht, und der Simson des Neuen Testamentes hat durch die Macht seines Herrn durch sein Fasten und seine Keuschheit die heidnischen Philister seiner Tage unterjocht und sie unter das Joch des Dienstes des Messias gespannt, da sie seine Bande nicht zerreißen konnten . . . Im Alten Testament hat er (sein Herr) seine Kraft gezeigt, im Neuen seine Gnade. Mögen seine Kraft und seine Gnade bei uns sein alle Tage.

(But Samson played no analagous role in contemporary rabbinic Judaism, if the fact that no Talmudic rabbi ever bore the name is significant. According to J. Z. Lauterbach, “Even in the Talmudic period many seem to have denied that Samson was a historic figure; he was

and F. Justi, *op. cit.*, s.v. Manavaz, p. 189. This particular foreigner was a Jew, and the association with the house of Monobazes is obvious. But the name was also a good Armenian one.

9) See Josephus, *Antiquities* XX. 2. 2., and Tacitus, 15.1.14.

apparently regarded as a purely mythological personage.”¹⁰) If this is so, then one may have further reason for believing that Judaism in the northern part of the Mesopotamian valley differed substantially from that in the south.)

III

THE RELIABILITY OF THE ARBELA TRADITION

Oriental traditions are notoriously difficult to assess historically. That is no reason however either to accept them at face value, or to dismiss them out of hand. The Arbela Chronicler claimed that Christianity reached Adiabene before the fall of the Arsacids, and probably much before that, and presented episcopal records to show that by 224 A.D., there were already twenty bishops in eighty-one sees in the western satrapies of the Iranian Empire (though none in Nisibis or in Seleucia-Ctesiphon, Sachau pp. 61-2). Whether the detailed accounts of individual bishops' lives are sound or not we shall never know. All we have is a tradition that Christianity took root very early in Adiabene.

This tradition, on the face of it, is not unreasonable, even though its details pose difficulties. From Acts 2.9¹¹) it is clear that the existence of Christianity was known to Jews across the Euphrates well before 100 A.D., though we do not know whether some of them accepted it or not, nor do we know anything further about their religious convictions. In the Roman Empire, Christianity found its earliest adherents among Hellenistic Jews, who were allegedly more willing to accept the Christian interpretation of prophetic promises than were Palestinian Jews. In the Parthian Empire, some Jews were no more literate in the Hebrew language and classical traditions than were those in Alexandria, for we know that translations of Scripture into “Elamite” and “Median” for Jewish readers were prepared in the Tannaitic period, according to Bab. Talmud Shabbat 115a, where we are told that such translations, among others, may be saved from a fire on the Sabbath even though they may not be read. It is not unreasonable to suppose that such Jews, like similar ones in the Hellenistic world, would have provided a promising audience for Christian missionaries. Nor is it far-fetched to infer that Adiabenians, who were influenced by the

10) J. Z. Lauterbach, “Samson in Rabbinical Literature”, *Jewish Encyclopedia* XI 1-2. See also Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia, 1947), IV 47 f. He was regarded as a profligate, and VI, 201 n. 101, Samson was regarded as one of three least worthy of the judges.

11) On Acts 2.9, see Ernst Haenchen, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (Gottingen, 1959), pp. 133-5; F. J. Foakes Jackson and Kirsopp Lake, *The Beginnings of Christianity, I, The Acts of the Apostles iv. English Translation and Commentary* by Kirsopp Lake and Henry J. Cadbury (London, 1933), pp. 18-20.

newly-converted Jews of the royal house, and who do not seem to have had among them Tannaim or other Jewish authorities, similarly adopted the new faith, though Xorenazî's tradition suggests that the house of Monobazes itself did not. We know that in Edessa, Jews were Addai's first followers, and gained for him a hearing before King Abgar.¹²⁾ Likewise in Adiabene the presence of Jews must have facilitated the establishment of Christianity.

F. C. Burkitt dates the mission of Addai in Edessa at the last third of the second century. Since Addai allegedly played the same role in the foundation of Adiabenean Christianity by converting Pekidha, Burkitt rejects the chronology of the Arbela chronicle. He says that the names of the bishops may be genuine, but the lengths of their episcopates and the serious gaps between them "seemed designed to bring up the establishment of the mission into early post-apostolic times. That a Syriac-speaking Christianity was introduced into Adiabene and that there were bishops in Arbela before the collapse of the Parthian Empire may be granted, but it is all subsequent to the conversion of the king of Edessa."¹³⁾

I share Burkitt's skepticism of the oriental traditions. One may always argue about how fictitious episcopal lists may be, for there is massive evidence that such lists were intended to demonstrate that the several churches that preserved them date back to apostolic times. Yet skepticism should apply with equal force in studying all traditions. One cannot very well accept the historicity of the Edessan traditions to the extent that Addai is treated as a wholly credible historical figure, on the one hand, and at the same time deny the historicity of the Arbela account because this same Addai figures in it and thus seems to present an anachronism. We ought not to place too great stress on the participation by Addai himself in the conversion of the first Christians in Adiabene. Rather, one should keep in mind that three personalities were invariably associated with the early apostolate to Mesopotamian lands, Thomas, who went on to India, Addai, and Mar Mari.¹⁴⁾ It was perfectly natural for the Adiabenean church to associate the name of Addai with the conversion of the satrapy. Yet that fiction—if it was a fiction—does not disqualify the more fundamental tradition,

12) I have discussed these traditions in "Studies on the Problem of Tannaim in Babylonia (Ca. 130-160)", *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, XXX, 1962, pp. 87-91. A full bibliography will be found there.

13) Cited above n. 4.

14) See B. Spuler, "Die Nestorianische Kirche", *Handbuch der Orientalistik*, ed., B. Spuler et al., VIII, *Religion*, ii. *Religionsgeschichte des Orients in der Zeit der Weltreligionen* (Leiden and Cologne, 1961), p. 120. Spuler also cites Mar Mari, but he lived much later than the period under discussion. See also W. Bauer, *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im Ältesten Christentum*, 1934,, *pass.*

preserved by the Adiabenean see, that Christianity reached Arbela about the time of Trajan.

I think it more reasonable to reassess the Addai tradition in the Edessan church. As Burkitt himself pointed out¹⁵⁾ the two traditions surrounding Addai's conversion of Edessa themselves exhibit fundamental contradictions. One of these traditions placed Addai and Abgar in the time of Jesus himself, and both of them exhibit chronological difficulties of the sort which Burkitt cites in rejecting the Arbela tradition. According to the tradition that Addai and Abgar were Jesus' contemporaries, Addai could well have gone on to Adiabene before 100 A.D. The literary evidence does not, therefore, decisively *prove* that Addai's coming to Adiabene *had* to antedate his appearance at Edessa. I do not for one minute suggest that these traditions are sound. I merely suggest that the Edessan traditions are by no means sufficiently consistent or chronologically convincing to force us to reject the Arbela tradition which places the conversion of the first Christians there at about 100 A.D., if that tradition seems on the grounds to be plausible.

It is, in my opinion, entirely plausible. What probably happened is that Christianity reached Adiabene in much the same way as it reached Edessa, namely, through the adherence of some of the local Jewish community to the new faith. In both places the presence of Judaism must have been decisive, for, when all is said and done, these are the *only* eastern churches which claimed to date as far back as 100 A.D., (though not alone in claiming apostolic succession) and in both of these cities there existed considerable Jewries. Yet the character of Judaism in the two places must have been equally important.

Christianity made no progress at all in Nisibis, which was not far from Edessa, during Parthian times, nor was there a bishop in Seleucia-Ctesiphon, at the heart of Babylonia, before the early fourth century. What these two centers had in common was the presence of important Tannaitic academies. That in Nisibis was headed by R. Judah b. Bathyra through much of the second century, and from ca. 135 to ca. 145, the most important students of R. Akiba lived there as well. There were Tannaitic authorities in Babylonia as well, and an academy was founded by the disciples of R. Ishmael in Huzal, where Babylonian Tannaitic authorities such as R. Ahai the son of R. Josiah, R. Hiyya, Issi b. Judah, and Samuel studied.¹⁶⁾ Thus it may reasonably be inferred that where Tannaitic Judaism was strong among Jews in the Parthian Empire, there Christianity made little progress, while where Tannaitic Judaism was weak, or where the authority of the Tannaim

15) F. C. Burkitt, *Early Eastern Christianity* (London 1904), pp. 1-39.

16) *PAAJR* XXX, 91-104.

did not reach, as in Edessa, Adiabene ¹⁷), and probably also Dura ¹⁸), there Christianity found a sympathetic hearing among the Jews.

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¹⁷) There is acitation of a R. Jacob of Adiabene (Bab. Talmud Bava Batra 26b), but we know nothing more about him than that he asked a question of the late third century Babylonian Amora, R. Hisda.

¹⁸) I believe that Erwin R. Goodough is correct in maintaining that Dura Jews were deeply Hellenized. See his *Jewish Symbols in Greco-Roman Times* (N.Y. 1964), IX-XI, and my "Judaism at Dura Europos", *History of Religions* IV, 1964, pp. 81-102.